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## HUMILIATION AND JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY<sup>1</sup>

*Humillación y justicia en niños en condiciones de pobreza*

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### ABSTRACT

As a matter of justice children are entitled to many different things. In this paper we will argue that one of these things is positive self-relations (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem), and that this implies that they must not be humiliated. This allows us to criticize poverty as unjust and to conclude that it should be alleviated. We will defend this claim in three steps: (1) we will introduce and examine three types of positive self-relations (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) and argue that children are entitled to all of these; (2) we will move on to examine the concept of humiliation and argue that acts of humiliating are unjust even if the victims do not experience them as humiliating; (3) finally, we will provide five arguments as to why it is humiliating for children to live in poverty. The five arguments presented in the last section are: (a) poverty is connected to other forms of injustice; (b) poverty is undeserved and represents an arbitrary feature of affected children for which they cannot be held responsible; (c) poverty is widespread among children; (d) poverty is imposed on children because they are part of a larger social group; (e) poverty is an enduring humiliation and not just an occasional incident.

*Key words:* Humiliation; Justice; Poverty; Children.

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## RESUMEN

Los niños merecen muchas cosas diferentes en términos de justicia. En este trabajo argumentaremos que una de las cosas que requieren son relaciones positivas (confianza en ellos mismos, autorrespeto y autoestima) y también defenderemos que lo anterior implica que no deben ser humillados. Esto nos permitirá rechazar la pobreza como injusta y concluir que debería ser disminuida. Esta tesis será defendida en tres pasos diferentes: (1) presentaremos y examinaremos tres tipos de relaciones positivas con uno mismo (autoconfianza, autorrespeto y autoestima); (2) continuaremos examinando el concepto de humillación y argumentando que los actos de humillación son injustos incluso cuando las víctimas no los experimenten como humillantes; (3) por último, propondremos cinco argumentos a favor de que vivir en la pobreza es una forma de humillación para los niños. Los cinco argumentos que defenderé en la última sección son: (a) la pobreza se conecta con otras formas de injusticia; (b) es inmerecida y arbitraria para los niños afectados, que no pueden considerarse en ningún caso responsables de la misma; (c) la pobreza está extendida entre la infancia; (d) la pobreza se les impone a los niños por ser miembros de un grupo social más amplio; (e) la pobreza es una humillación duradera y no un incidente ocasional.

*Palabras clave:* Humillación; Justicia; Pobreza; Niños.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss a certain aspect of child poverty, namely the humiliation it causes, and how the concept of humiliation can be used to criticize child poverty as unjust. The author does not claim that this supersedes other forms of criticism or is superior to them, but we do seek to show that this is an important but often overlooked aspect of criticisms of child poverty. We will argue that child poverty threatens and undermines the positive self-relations of these children, their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, because they experience their living conditions as humiliating. Many studies on (global) justice do acknowledge the importance of these positive self-relations, for example those by John Rawls and more recently Axel Honneth (see Laitinen 2012). Rawls and Honneth would also agree that it is highly problematic that these positive self-relations are threatened by social conditions. This contribution is grounded in the tradition of the capability approach, which acknowledges the importance of these positive self-relations/“self-respect”, for example, is one of Martha Nussbaum’s “central capabilities” (Nussbaum 2011) and their deterioration due to

poverty, especially in contexts of absolute poverty (Zavaleta Reyles 2007). Something else to be borne in mind is the discussion of the moral harm caused by poverty by Christian Neuhäuser and Julia Müller, in which they conclude that the humiliation of poverty is incompatible with the aims of a decent society and should therefore be abolished (Neuhäuser and Müller 2011). We will support this claim but based on a different normative background; we also focus on children, not mentioned by Neuhäuser and Müller.

In this article will claim that positive “self-relations” “self-confidence”, “self-respect” and “self-esteem” are dimensions of the well-being and well-becoming of children and that children are entitled to them as a matter of justice. This focus on children’s well-being is not new in the capability approach and is based on an understanding of children’s well-being as multi-dimensional and comprising a set of different capabilities and functions, such as being physically and mentally healthy, being socially included, having sufficient shelter, material resources and goods, or being well nourished (Biggeri & Mehrotra 2011). Hence, well-being does not refer primarily to a certain state of mind like happiness or satisfaction but encompasses a wide range of capabilities and ideal functions. Justice should be equally concerned with the well-being and the well-becoming of children. Childhood is a crucial phase for one’s future life-course. The capabilities and functions which matter for justice are also objectively determinable, and their distribution among children can be influenced by societal arrangements, although not all of them are fully controllable by the state. For example, health is largely determined by social factors that can be controlled by the state; however, there are many cases of ill/health which are beyond the control of the state, such as those caused by genetic variation or tragic accidents. Positive self-relations also fall into this category: they are to a large extent, though not totally, determined by outside factors. It is therefore not the obligation of the state to make sure all children have these positive self-relations, but it *is* the obligation of the state to provide all children with the conversion factors that give them the best chance of gaining these positive self-relations. Those cases where it is beyond the control of the state and the societal arrangements that children achieve the functioning of these positive self-relations are not unjust.

## 2. THE “FERTILE FUNCTIONS” OF POSITIVE SELF-RELATIONS

In this section we will first argue that each and every child is entitled to positive self-relations as a matter of justice. These positive self-relations are

part of the set of capabilities and functions that are needed for sufficient well-being and well-becoming. A just society is responsible for securing the conversion factors that are needed to develop and sustain these capabilities and functions throughout childhood and a person's whole life course. We want to differentiate three positive self-relations: self-respect, self-esteem and self-confidence, which are closely connected to each other, so as to discuss their respective social bases. To do so, we will refer to the works of Axel Honneth and his tripartite model of recognition (Honneth 1996). These three positive self-relations are "fertile functions", which means that they positively influence the development of other capabilities and functions (Wolff & de-Shalit 2007). We will go on to stress that children are entitled to these fertile functions of positive self-relations and not only to the capabilities to achieve them if they want to. It is important that children have and develop self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, although, as stated above, the state cannot fully control whether this happens.

Honneth distinguishes three types of positive self-relations: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth 1996). Self-confidence refers to the idea of trust in oneself (and in one's own body and mind) and also one's close environment. Self-respect describes the view of oneself as possessing dignity and moral worth. Self-esteem describes the view of oneself as a particular and valuable member of a greater community because of one's traits and contributions. Honneth links these to three forms or modes of intersubjective recognition that are necessary to develop and sustain self-relations. These are love and care, moral respect and rights, and social esteem. While love and care refer to one's physical, mental and emotional needs, moral respect refers to the idea of being a moral (responsible) person, and social esteem refers to one's particular traits and abilities. Honneth's model claims that humans need to be loved and cared for in close personal relationships to build basic self-confidence, that they need to be respected as moral agents, and that this respect needs to be translated into certain rights that enable a person to respect themselves; people also need to be socially esteemed for their particular contributions within a social group to acquire a sense of their own self-esteem. Together, Honneth argues, these three forms of positive self-relations are at the core of an individual's subjectivity and identity. They are closely connected to the ability to realize one's self and one's own goals and life plans. In this respect, the recognition approach and the capability approach are congruent, for they both highlight the normative weight of individual freedom and self-realization; Honneth, however, puts particular emphasis on their intersubjective conditions, which are described as forms and modes of recognition (Graf & Schweiger 2013). Only if persons are

enabled to experience all the modes of recognition, and are thus enabled to develop the three positive forms of self-relations they can become autonomous beings, happy people with their identity and living the lives they want. To put it differently, the development of the “*We*” is bound to the successful integration of the “*I*” (Honneth 2012). On the other hand, the recognition approach also conceptualizes the threatening of these positive self-relations and their deformation through forms and modes of misrecognition, which mirror the three types of positive recognition. Honneth distinguishes here physical abuse, which destroys self-confidence, exclusion and the deprivation of rights, which threaten self-respect, and denigration and humiliation, which undermine self-esteem. Each and every human being is entitled to be protected from such experiences of misrecognition that distort and undermine the development of personal identity; this is the core of a recognition-theoretical understanding of morality and justice, which aims to secure the intersubjective conditions of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, and consequently autonomy and self-realization. In recent years Honneth has moved increasingly into the field of social theory, seeking to develop an institutionalized understanding of love, moral respect and social esteem (Fraser & Honneth 2003; Honneth 2014). Hence, the recognition approach should not—at least not primarily—be understood as a psychological or anthropological theory about the development of the self, but rather as a way to conceptualize the configuration of modern capitalistic societies and the social embedding –and deformation– of the individuals within them. Love and care, respect and rights, and social esteem and solidarity describe generalized forms of intersubjective relations for which people strive. Humans need and want to be loved, respected and esteemed, and if they are not, then the experience is harmful and unjust.

Some modifications are necessary to apply to children Honneth’s model of positive self-relations and their development through the modes of recognition. While Honneth discusses self-confidence in regard to children and how love and care are necessary to develop it, he does not do the same for self-respect and self-esteem. These two seem to be reserved for adults, and maybe also mature adolescents. Children, especially young children, do have rights, but in a different way to adults. They cannot act and reason about their actions in a comprehensive way and hence cannot be held responsible in the same way as adults. This means that their self-respect cannot be based on the same grounds. This is also, although in a different way, true for self-esteem. Honneth understands self-esteem and the correlating form of recognition of social esteem in the context of a modern working society, where people are valued for their contribution in the sphere of work and labour. Children

are excluded from this sphere; they do not and should not work in modern societies. In those societies where children do work, the practice is often criticized as cruel and inappropriate. Honneth conceptualizes both self-respect and self-esteem in such a way that they do not fit for children. This raises the question of whether they simply cannot have them, or whether it is not also unjust if they lack them. Honneth has not engaged with this question in any detail, but we believe that it is reasonable to consider it. Psychological research supports the idea that children need to be recognized in order to develop and actually experience self-respect and self-esteem from an early stage; such research shows that these positive self-relations are of actual importance for children and not only for adults (Thompson 2007). Any approach that focuses on the needs of children for recognition should take into account the points raised by Nigel Thomas, who argues that children are certainly not only subjects with particular needs (to which love and care relate) but also moral beings and rights-bearers, and that they do make valuable contributions to society (Thomas 2012). So, children not only need recognition, and are entitled to it because it influences their development and in consequence their well-being and well-becoming, but should also be seen as people worthy of recognition in their own right. As Thomas also states, the particular contributions of children and their status as rights-bearers are both under-recognized in theory as well as in practice. Children are not passive (moral) objects but active (moral) subjects. Their status as subjects should be taken seriously; children should not be viewed as somehow “defective” in comparison to adults.

We will now move on to explain the positive self-relations of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem as particularly valuable functions for children, and which children should be entitled to as a matter of justice. Positive self-relations are valuable in themselves, and without them a child’s well-being could be damaged severely. But positive self-relations are also of great instrumental value, because they are the basis for developing other important capabilities and functions. Jonathan Wolff and Anvar de-Shalit introduced the concept of “*fertile functioning*” to describe functions that have a positive influence on other capabilities and functions (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007). Positive self-relations are “*fertile*” in two senses. On the one hand, they are fertile for the development of the child, because these positive self-relations are –as Honneth suggests– necessary for someone to develop into an autonomous adult and realize him or herself in his or her life. Without the achievement of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem it is very unlikely if not impossible for a person to develop an undistorted self and to make important life choices for themselves. However, a sole focus on

autonomy and the ability to live a life one has reason to value is inappropriate for children; such responsibilities would overburden them. A sole focus on development would reduce children to “adults-to-be”, although it is still a necessary dimension of justice for children to have in mind what they need to achieve to become “well-being” adults. On the other hand these positive self-relations are also fertile for the actual well-being of the child and the achievement of other capabilities and functions that matter for the child during childhood. For example, self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are connected to and greatly influence (physical and mental) health and the ability to participate in social activities and to engage in social relationships or learning and playing. All these are valuable functions for children, which they should be able to achieve as a matter of justice; positive self-relations influence whether and to what extent this is possible.

The recognition-theoretical model shows how self-relations and social interactions are intertwined, and how they provide the conditions for valuable “*being*” and “*doing*”. Recognition theory also highlights the idea that positive self-relations are (normally) the result of interactions with one’s environment and the persons and institutions within that environment. Positive self-relations are socially influenced, and material living conditions are an important factor. Because of their importance for the well-being and well-becoming of children, as well as for their fertility in respect to other capabilities and functions, and because they are at least partly controllable by societal arrangements, positive self-relations can be seen as a matter of justice. A just society is thus obliged to provide each and every child with the conversion factors that are needed to develop and sustain self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, although there will always be cases where the state cannot control and guarantee the actual achievement of these positive self-relations. A just society is also obliged to minimize those disadvantages to develop and sustain positive self-relations. If poverty can be shown to be disadvantageous, then the state is obliged to alleviate it.

### 3. THE INJUSTICE OF HUMILIATION

Poverty is humiliating and can undermine and destroy the positive self-relations children have. Honneth’s notion of humiliation is not very elaborate; it seems he understands all different forms of misrecognition as (potentially) humiliating (Honneth 1996; Honneth 2003). But some working definition of humiliation is necessary to understand in what ways it hurts people and in what ways it is caused by poverty. One important thing



to highlight is that humiliation can be understood as both an act (of those who humiliate others) and an emotion (of those who are being humiliated).<sup>2</sup> Evelin Lindner describes the act in powerful words:

“Humiliation means the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honour or dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed, against your will (or in some cases with your consent as in cases of religious self-humiliation or in sado-masochism) and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations. It may involve acts of force, including violent force. At its heart is the idea of pinning down, putting down, or holding to the ground.” (Lindner 2007, 5)

Such acts of humiliation usually, but not always, cause victims to experience the emotion of feeling humiliated. The normative weight of humiliation can be attributed to both the act and the emotion of humiliation, and both can be separated from each other. In the first case, people are obliged to refrain from actions that can be described as humiliating regardless of whether or not those who are victims of such actions are actually humiliated by them. In the second case, people are obliged to refrain from such actions that do actually humiliate people regardless of whether these actions are humiliating according to the above definition by Lindner. Consider the perspective of those who are humiliated: in the first case people are entitled not to be treated in ways characterized by the above criteria of humiliation even if they do not experience them as humiliating. In the second case, people are entitled not to be treated in ways that actually do humiliate them, however these actions appear. In most cases this differentiation will not turn out to produce different results, because, as Lindner suggests, most acts of humiliation will cause the emotion of feeling humiliated on the side of the victims. Nonetheless, there will be cases in which the victims will not experience or describe themselves as being humiliated, for example due to distorted self-perception or the acceptance of cultural norms. The capability approach discusses such phenomena under the term of “*adaptive preferences*”; they can be developed in people living within deprived living conditions (Teschl & Comim 2005). Adapting to a cultural norm that can be described as

2. We do not wish to dig deeper into the question of what an emotion is in contrast to a feeling or sentiment. What is important here is to note that the emotion of humiliation involves a cognitive and evaluative element. Most of the literature that is concerned with humiliation and poverty seems to use the terms “*emotion*” and “*feeling*” interchangeably.



humiliating from the outside can in fact be a way to cope and make the best of a seemingly hopeless and powerless situation. A normative account of humiliation should be able to criticize such forms. There are also cases in which people feel humiliated where there is no humiliating action, because of a misunderstanding or also a distorted expectation towards another or others. Here, we wish to separate morally relevant from non-relevant cases of humiliation; in order to do so, we suggest interpreting humiliation as an act that need not result in a certain emotion of humiliation experienced by the victim. It is the action that needs to be evaluated against moral standards –for which the reaction of the victim is a part– and not the actual result of this action.

Let us now consider acts of humiliation that are freely and willingly experienced by those who are humiliated. Such acts are often thought to be unproblematic from a moral point of view, because the autonomy of the person has to be respected. If a person freely chooses to experience humiliating acts perpetrated upon them by others, or to humiliate him or herself, he or she should be allowed to do that. The concept of “adaptive preferences” claims that at least some of these acts of freely chosen humiliation are problematic, because people can be alienated from what they really want. It is also possible that victims of abuse can try to deal with what happened to them by convincing themselves it was what they wanted. In such cases a certain degree of paternalism in administering support seems justified. In the case of children, the focus of this article, choice and autonomy are even more problematic. Children are still in the process of developing the mental and emotional capacities to choose freely and to be autonomous. Choice is important for children but it seems unreasonable to think that children have the capacities to choose to be humiliated. We therefore reject the proposition that acts of humiliation towards children can be justified by the argument of free choice.

Only such acts of humiliation by which the victims have good reasons to feel humiliated should count as morally reprehensible. Such an understanding has been put forward by Avishai Margalit, who defines humiliation as a “behaviour or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured” (Margalit 1996, 9). Here we will use the much wider concept of humiliation cited above from Lindner, but Margalit’s insight that acts of humiliation need to be judged based on reasonable criteria that go beyond the experience of the victim, needs to be observed. Hence, it is not enough that victims simply feel humiliated to judge the actions that lead to this emotion to be morally reprehensible and unjust. But it is also not necessary that victims actually feel humiliated

and know that they are humiliated. In the case of children we should not attribute the lack of feeling humiliated to their free choice to experience acts of humiliation.

To conclude, we want to define humiliation in this context as incorporating such acts that can reasonably be judged to injure the positive self-relations of a child. In other words: humiliation is such an act that can reasonably be thought to cause an experience of feeling humiliated on the side of the victim, even if this is not the case. The actual experience of feeling humiliated is important, and damaging, but the normative benchmark has to be applied to the act that causes this feeling or can be judged to be likely to be a cause of this feeling. Children are entitled to grow up and live in conditions that are non-humiliating in this sense, and in which they find all the sufficient opportunities to develop positive relations towards themselves and to others. Especially because childhood is a very sensitive phase, children have a right to be protected from humiliation.

#### 4. HUMILIATION AND POVERTY DURING CHILDHOOD

Poverty humiliates children in different ways. The first question is whether children actually experience their poverty as humiliating, and how this affects their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. The second question, which should be carefully distinguished from the first, is whether it would be understandable and reasonable for those children living in poverty to have their self-relations negatively affected by it, although they do not actually experience their poverty as humiliating. The distinction between these two questions is important because an injustice is still an injustice even if its victims have the coping resources and resilience to adapt to their living conditions, and are still able to live a subjectively good life. We argue here that the injustice of poverty should be determined more or less independently of the subjective experience of it. To claim that poverty is unjust because it undermines the positive self-relations of its victims is therefore not to say that this is happening in all or even the majority of cases, but to say that poverty is a condition that it would be reasonable to experience in such a way. It is unjust because it puts those who are affected by it in danger even if they have the resources to avoid the most negative consequences. We evaluate poverty from a third-person perspective and not from a first-person perspective. This does not mean we exclude from our analysis the perspective of children who are victims of humiliation. The views of the victims of humiliation in determining these acts as injustice in a moral sense

are nonetheless not authoritative, but play a consultative role (Archard & Skivenes 2009). The views of children feeling humiliated by their poverty are to be considered because the victims have a right to be heard; otherwise, many injustices would potentially go unnoticed.

The available empirical evidence suggests that children, like adults, also experience poverty as humiliating and that this has sometimes devastating effects on their mental health and well-being, as well as on their self-relations (Walker *et al.* 2013). Poverty causes shame; it is perceived as stigma and many children feel they are of less worth than others because of their poverty. This again triggers coping mechanisms that do not always work in the child's best interests, like withdrawal from social relations, anger and aggression, or giving up. Tess Ridge summarizes the empirical evidence from qualitative studies on child poverty:

"Fears about being left out or marginalized pervaded children's accounts. Poverty in childhood extracts a high emotional toll on children trying to 'fit in' and 'join in' with their peers. Children's inner fears and their experiences of feeling humiliated, sad and shamed are often hidden and they are rarely asked about their thoughts and feelings. However, sensitively conducted studies have revealed the deep emotional costs that hardship can bring to children's lives" (Ridge 2011, 76).

As already suggested, it would be insufficient to jump from such empirical descriptions of the experiences of humiliation to the conclusion that they constitute an injustice. In theory it is easy to construct an example in which a child feels all these emotions but which is morally unproblematic. For example, a child can feel sad, ashamed and humiliated for being the only child to get a bad mark on a test or for being caught stealing some sweets in a shop. The question is therefore whether, and if so, on what grounds can poverty reasonably be judged to injure the positive self-relations of a child, whether or not these children experience it as humiliating and harmful. Here we discuss six such reasons:

(1) The humiliation caused by poverty is connected to other forms of injustice. There are many good reasons to argue that the poverty of children is unjust regardless of its humiliating nature, that it threatens certain central capabilities and functions like health and education, or that it is socially excluding (Leßmann 2014; Alkire & Roche 2012). The humiliation of poverty is closely connected to these other injustices and would not exist without them; hence, it is an additional burden with its own normative weight. Two forms of humiliation connected to poverty can be distinguished here: on the one hand, poverty itself can be humiliating without children being ridiculed, denigrated or in any other way humiliated by others for

being poor. The public discourse on poverty stigmatizes those who are poor, and children are aware of this stigma even if others do not humiliate them directly. Having less in common with others can be humiliating if it is a question of lacking basic goods –or capabilities and functions– that are seen as normal in a society. It is not possible to name a specific actor who is responsible for this kind of humiliation; instead, it is caused by a societal atmosphere that constantly suggests to the poor that they are of less worth, that they are lazy and on the bottom rung of society. On the other hand, poverty is connected to separate acts of humiliation that victimize poor children. They are humiliated because of the clothes they wear and the toys they have to play with by others (children and adults), simply for being poor. In both cases –poverty as humiliation in itself and poverty as the cause of being humiliated by others– injustice is at the centre of poverty.

(2) The humiliation caused by poverty is undeserved and targets a feature of those children for which they cannot be held responsible. Children growing up in poverty cannot be held responsible for their poverty. Children do not choose to be poor and they cannot choose the families and social environments they are born into. Also, children have very little possibility to alleviate their poverty and they are dependent on support from others. The humiliation they experience as well as all the other hardships connected to poverty are therefore not deserved or any form of legitimate punishment for any actions of these children. This is true for the humiliation that is inherent in being poor and for the additional acts of humiliation that target poor children. Being poor is not a personal failure and nor is being ridiculed for being poor a legitimate response from other people. It is a particularly cruel fact that children in poverty often feel responsible for their situation and blame themselves.

(3) The humiliation caused by poverty is widespread and a common experience of children in poverty. Humiliating acts in connection to the poverty status of a child are widespread –they are not rare incidents. Children are often confronted with such acts in both public and private places, for example the school, the playground or the hospital. Humiliation is also present in the media, where poor people are labelled as lazy and anti-social. Poverty influences the social relations children can have and it is nearly impossible to avoid humiliating acts without huge personal costs such as those caused by withdrawal and self-imposed exclusion. As we have already cited, feeling humiliated and ashamed of oneself is a common reaction to being poor, even in the absence of particular acts of humiliation. This is because the condition of being relatively poor necessarily implies that one has less and can do less than is seen as normal in the respective society. Failing that standard can lead

one to feel that one is of less worth, and to the avoidance of displaying that deprivation in public and even in front of friends.

(4) The humiliation caused by poverty is imposed on these children because they are part of a larger social group. The humiliation that comes with poverty targets children not because of any individual traits in them that make them particularly different but because they are part of a larger social group, as is the case when children face humiliation for being part of a certain social, racial, ethnic or religious community.<sup>3</sup> Once again, it is important to note that children cannot choose to be poor or not, and nor can they choose to which social group they belong. Many victims of poverty, both children and adults, internalize their condition and the public discourse about it in such a way that they come to feel guilty and responsible for being poor. They attach blame to themselves for something that they are not responsible for and that they cannot change. If one takes a neutral position, in general poverty is not caused by individual choices but is a systemic issue. Feeling and being humiliated by and for poverty is therefore morally wrong.

(5) The humiliation caused by poverty is enduring, not only an occasional incident. Even short-term poverty lasts for months and often years, and is very difficult to escape. The longevity of poverty is problematic because it leaves fewer chances for recovery and increases the damage caused. Especially child poverty has been proven to have damaging consequences that influence a person's whole future life-course, including his or her socio-economic opportunities and health.

(6) The humiliation caused by poverty targets the particular vulnerability of children. Children are developing and vulnerable beings. They depend on a safe and caring environment to experience a good childhood and to develop into functioning adults. There is a deep connection between the well-being and the well-becoming of children and child poverty; the humiliation connected to child poverty targets human beings in a particularly vulnerable phase, when they lack the resources and capabilities to defend themselves in the face of hardships and the actions of others. Children who grow up in poverty feel they have good reasons to feel left out by society and that they have fewer life chances – and often do feel this way. This can trigger a vicious

3. One important difference should be noted here: being poor is humiliating in itself, whereas belonging to a racial or ethnic group is certainly not. But in both cases people are humiliated for belonging to a group and not for whom they are in particular. In the social sciences the notion of “*group-focused enmity*” has been developed to describe such acts and beliefs.

circle of anger and aggression, which diminishes life chances even more and can lead to the social exclusion of these children and young people.

These six reasons are sufficient to criticize the humiliation connected to poverty as unjust, even if children do not experience the emotion of feeling humiliated and even if they have the coping resources to protect their positive self-relations (only very few affected children have these resources). It is reasonable to judge poverty as humiliating both because it is in itself humiliating and because other people and institutions engage in humiliating acts that target children living in poverty. Under the current regime of capitalism, which constantly produces and justifies the existence of poverty, it is very unlikely that things will change, or that these six reasons will be enough to trigger such change. Child poverty is unjust for many reasons and is a major obstacle to equality of opportunity, a value that is held high in the ideology of capitalism although the system violates it all the time. We have a much more modest goal in this article: to show that humiliation connected to child poverty is unjust and that we should criticize poverty on this basis.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: A SOCIETY WITHOUT HUMILIATION

Children are entitled to grow up and live without being humiliated. Poverty makes children more vulnerable to humiliation; it is in fact often experienced as such and there are good reasons to understand poverty as being humiliating even if children experience it otherwise. Our argument that poverty should be alleviated because it threatens the positive self-relations of affected children is built on both empirical knowledge about poverty and on theoretical grounds. A just society is also a society without humiliation, where each and every child lives and grows up in an environment that lets them develop and achieve the functions of positive self-relations. Such an environment is described by the recognition approach with three types of recognition: love and care, respect and rights, and social esteem and solidarity. These insights can be integrated into a capability approach and conceptualized as external conversion factors. In a just society each and every child is entitled to experience love and care, respect and social esteem. A society without humiliation will have to end poverty, not only for children but for all. This means that such a society will on the one hand have to prohibit acts of humiliation connected to poverty that are perpetrated by its members and institutions, and on the other hand will have to target the eradication of poverty, or at least change the public framing in such a way that it is less humiliating to be poor. A society without humiliation will not

allow children to grow up under conditions that diminish their well-being and well-becoming. The social, economic and political structures that allow poverty to exist are to be held responsible and changed. Child poverty is a systemic injustice, within which further acts of injustice and humiliation can happen more easily.

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